

International Centre for Minority Studies  
and Intercultural Relations (IMIR)

Situation of the Roma Community in Bulgaria  
and the Framework Programme for Roma Integration  
2001/2002

Antonina Zhelyazkova



2002

Sofia 1303, 55, Antim I St., tel: (+3592) 8323112; fax: 9310-583;  
e-mail: [minority@imir-bg.org](mailto:minority@imir-bg.org); <http://www.imir-bg.org>

# **Situation of the Roma Community in Bulgaria and the Framework Programme for Roma Integration, 2001/2002**

Dr. Antonina Zhelyazkova, Chair of the Board of Directors, IMIR

## *1. Assessment of progress in implementing the Framework Programme*

Public institutions' impossibility to prepare and implement effective Roma integration policies and practices, as well as their inability to adequately cooperate with international institutions and utilize Roma community development funds, is due mainly to the lack of a full data base providing information about the situation of the Roma, their demographic, social, health and educational status. Accurate data and their analysis by specialists in different social sciences who know the Roma community's specific features are required in order to enable national experts to prepare adequate programmes for integrated interventions, as well as to ensure timely and precise direction of international support funds towards the respective target groups.

A small step forward, which demonstrates the concern of the new Government of the Simeon II National Movement (SNM) with solving Roma problems, is the replacement of incompetent civil servants in the National Council for Ethnic and Demographic Affairs (NCEDA) with new persons whose good will and competence has been proven: Minister without Portfolio Nedjet Mollov, in charge of the integration of minorities, has appointed as NCEDA Secretary Mihail Ivanov, a human rights activist who has been working on the problems of Bulgaria's minorities on a professional basis for almost 12 years now.

Minorities themselves and the NGO sector were consulted for the first time about the issues of minority integration. At Minister Mollov's insistence, the Republic of Bulgaria's Report pursuant to Article 25.1 of the Council of Europe's Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, was sent to NGOs for an opinion; this enabled minority representatives, as well as competent independent experts, to demand revision and scientific editing of the Report prior to publication. In the Report, whose authors were not named, experts found a number of flaws, outdated terminology, inaccurate data, omitted facts and even politically incorrect language.

Those are all the positive steps concerning minorities and their integration taken by the SNM Government to date.

## *2. Roma education: Bulgaria's number one problem*

One of the Government's most dangerous omissions is related to the education of Roma children. This predetermines grim forecasts for the future. The chasm that splits society in two is deepening – on one side are the young Bulgarians, Turks, Pomaks and youths from the other ethnic groups with comparatively adequate for the early 21<sup>st</sup> century education and culture complying with the majority of European and global requirements and criteria; on the other are the children of the Roma community, where illiteracy rates are growing every year, and young people without basic cultural and socially beneficial habits.

Under pressure from Roma and certain human rights nongovernmental organizations, an attempt to desegregate the education system is under way in Bulgaria. This complex and delicate project is implemented by well-intended enthusiasts, without specialized support from national experts and with limited funding from external donors.

The Ministry of Education is not assuming the responsibility to develop a comprehensive policy and philosophy of desegregation, and is allowing the implementation of not very competent and random projects which sometimes do more harm than good. In some cases they even have the very opposite effect, generating rivalry and hostility between Bulgarian and Roma children, as well as between their parents. Foreign experience is grafted automatically – even though this experience is often inadequate to the specific features of Bulgaria's society and educational system, as well as incompatible with the economic crisis and low living standards in the country.

The public institutions entrusted with decision-making on this issue are not even making an effort to formulate and analyze the fact that there are Roma schools in Bulgaria, or to identify the framework of the problem: is there segregation, what has caused the existence of hundreds of schools where the majority of students are Roma – is that due to racial reasons, geographic and administrative distribution or demographic factors. With the assistance of international donor institutions, NGOs have acquired considerable knowledge on the subject, but this knowledge is not used by the competent authorities to elaborate a general philosophy and policy on education and integration.

It is obvious to all of society that children from all ethnic communities should study together and have equal opportunities. This does not shock the public because it is in line with the Bulgarian school tradition. Ever since Bulgaria's 1878 Liberation, the children of Roma, dispersed among the local communities, have studied in the same schools and classes with the children of their neighbours from other ethnic communities – just as their parents have worked together, and neighbourly relations and mutual help have prevailed in everyday life. Today's concentration of Roma in large urban ghettos, village neighbourhoods or all-Roma settlements, has found the members of the different ethnic communities unprepared to cope with the complex problems caused by segregation and alienation.

For entirely objective demographic reasons and intensive and uneven migration in the past 10 to 12 years – and not because of segregative dispositions and practices – in 2002 Bulgaria has schools where 50% to 100% of the students are Roma living in mostly or all-Roma villages, neighbourhoods and ghettos in towns. There are 60 elementary, almost 350 primary and nine secondary schools of this kind in Bulgaria. The government is obliged to find funds or close down those schools and provide transport for Roma students to other schools with better conditions (this variant has been suggested by part of the Roma leaders and human rights activists) as a process of real desegregation; or to make sure that Roma schools have equal and better conditions, facilities and level for teaching as all other schools in Bulgaria (this variant has been suggested by experts who are realistic and aware of the levels of poverty in Bulgaria and of the helpless national budget).

The first variant requires a competently devised philosophy and strategy, commitment of significant state and public resources, participation of high-skilled children's psychologists and pedagogues, work with parents and teachers, etc. The second variant requires significantly less resources – for school repair, modern teaching aids, facilities and equipment, and incentives for high-skilled teachers and principals.

In fact, if there was a well-designed philosophy and policy on equal education for Roma children, the government would have probably applied both approaches on a parallel basis. Where possible, Roma children could attend the same pre-school classes as their Bulgarian peers, with funds subsequently provided for them to continue their primary education together, without the problems stemming from the different level of background knowledge, etc. Where this is impossible – in remote villages or neighbourhoods with compact and large Roma communities – the second approach could be applied, improving facilities and tuition in schools.

An A.S.A. 2002 survey studies Roma attitudes to the experimental desegregation of schools and, in general, their favoured approach to their children's education. Asked about the ways to equalize educational opportunities, the majority of respondents – 63% – say they prefer to have their children attend school together with Bulgarians on an equal footing and without special programmes for the purpose; as well as to have extra Bulgarian language classes if they attend school with Bulgarian students – 60%. Specialized support at school through extra Bulgarian language classes is favoured mainly by parents from remote areas, 74%, the capital city, 80%, and in the middle income groups, 62%. Sixty-six per cent think that desegregation projects are wrong to send Roma to the same central schools attended by Bulgarian and Turkish children, but in special classes. It is especially interesting that Roma are against the variant of having their children taught by Roma teachers in the Roma language – 60%.

The Roma respondents qualify – entirely correctly – Roma children's future opportunities compared with those of the majority of children in Bulgaria as lower in the following spheres: to find a job, to provide education for their children, to emigrated to a more advanced country, to be healthy and to have happy families.

What is most humiliating for the 12 years of democratic changes in Bulgaria is that the Roma promptly assess their children's opportunities in life compared to their own childhood prospects as much lower.

According to the sociological survey, conducted in end 2001 and early 2002, it must be noted that the problems of Roma children's education are seen as a priority not only by members of the majority, but are also of paramount importance for the Roma themselves. The Roma respondents were asked to grade on a scale of 1 to 3 the 11 most serious problems facing their households. "Lack of opportunities for education" is rated by the Roma fourth by priority after "unemployment, economic weights, and discrimination in employment".

The same survey also shows the consequences of the educational institutions' complete helplessness with regard to the Roma in the past 12 years: according to Roma respondents' self-assessments, the proportion of illiterate Roma is now 18.1%; of Roma with incompleting primary education, 24.2%; with primary education, 41.4%; with incompleting secondary education, 2.7%; with secondary education, 12.2%; and with higher education, 0.7% (results of the survey conducted by A.S.A. – Sofia).

This suggests the conclusion that the Roma, just as the members of the majority, recognize the threat to the future posed by the unequal education of Roma children, and are ready to make the requisite sacrifices if the policy on the issue is explained to them. They are also ready to make a bilateral compromise and to support the desegregative measures if they are conducted properly, and not amateurishly by incompetent and mercenary people. The Roma

are ready to sacrifice some of their newly acquired democratic rights – such as the right to study the Roma language – in the name of intensifying integration processes and securing a better future for their children.

The second conclusion is that public institutions are not adequate to Bulgarian society's educational needs, that they are behaving in an incompetent, lazy and, in many cases, timorous manner, and demonstrating to the monitoring European and other donor institutions servile and chaotic actions in this direction.

### *3. Roma's life prospects, unemployment and the emergence of an underclass versus the political promises of Roma integration into Bulgarian society*

When the Roma are asked in 2002, "what are your expectations of your life in five years?", almost 80% do not respond to this question. This percentage makes my commentary as an expert redundant, because it can be summed up in a single word: hopelessness! Still, as an expert I could warn the incumbents that such a high level of hopelessness is followed by a single category: fury!

Asked directly to assess their family's financial situation, the same Roma respond as follows: destitute, 30%; poor, 49%; average, 20%; and 0.6%, rich. Again, there is no need of expert commentary.

To amplify the conclusions in the previous section on education, I would note that economic hardships affect foremost those Roma who are without primary education, as well as those living in remote areas, who have large households and who are destitute.

In 2001/2002, one in ten Roma own a car, four in five have no toilet indoors, three in four have no bathroom, and three in four again do not have a single book at home.

Roma's income sources are also indicative of the utter futility of economic policies towards the Roma: 49% survive thanks to social welfare, 39% of the households live on old-age pensions and 34%, on child benefits, and 32% earn their livelihood from temporary jobs without a contract of employment. Just 22% of the respondents get regular pay under an employment contract, and 6% get regular pay without an employment contract.

More features of hopelessness: 38% of the Roma respondents are starving constantly, 27% starve one or two days a month, and 10% starve one or two days a year. Just 24% claim that they never starve. Let us see how starving Roma cope with this problem: they try to borrow money from neighbours; they simply starve and that's that; they scavenge for food in the fields and in gardens, with which they antagonize their neighbours from the other ethnic communities; 7% rummage in garbage cans; 4% beg; and 1.4% send their children out in the streets to earn money.

Against the background of those hopeless data, we know that 91% have never taken part in any employment or retraining programme. Whereas most of the token proportion of 6% who have, say that those programmes have not helped them at all, or few claim that they have helped them inconsiderably.

As regards the most important terms securing the protection of their human rights, the Roma rate their priorities as follows: 1. The family must not be threatened with starvation; 2. They

must have the same living standards as the other people in Bulgaria; 3. They must be able to find a job; 4. They must get their social welfare on time; 5. They must not be arrested without an arrest warrant; 6. The public administration must treat them with respect; 7. They must be able to provide a decent education for their children, etc.

Just 12% of the Roma are aware of some programmes assisting the Roma, and the majority are implemented not by the Government but by NGOs; those programmes are qualified mainly as being in the sphere of human rights protection and in education.

Economists note that when unemployment in a given community affects more than 30% of its members for over two years, the community becomes afflicted with processes of degradation with which it cannot cope alone. For years, the proportion of unemployed Roma has exceeded this critical limit by far. Pauperization in the community has acquired drastic proportions. Feeling excluded from society, the Roma start concentrating in order to survive, and intensify their spatial segregation from the rest of the population.

According to the experts who have also conducted in-depth interviews (Ilona Tomova), in some respects it is possible to talk of typical ghetto behaviour of the Roma in segregated neighbourhoods. More and more youths in those neighbourhoods grow up illiterate and do not associate their notions of their life and future with work. This increases the possibility that the inhabitants of the ghetto would rely on illegal income sources, which weakens and ultimately disrupts their link with the legal labour market. They eventually develop a ghetto philosophy, which is characterized by aggression and total rejection of the world beyond the community.

The conclusion is only one and it is dangerous for all of society, for politicians and for the incumbents in particular: We have all grounds to claim that in recent years we have been witnessing the formation of an underclass within the Roma community.

**21 January 2002**